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The Mandrake Fiend

by H. F. CLARK

No man has moved a mountain by faith though Marco Polo tells the tale of a one-eyed cobbler of the noble city of Baudec, who, by his faith, moved a mountain the distance of one mile. He was a holy and admirable man, no doubt, and in his day deservedly venerated, but to us, mountain moving has become a commonplace. How much more entertaining were his contemporaries and forefathers who, created whole ranges of mountainous myths and fables. They were dreamt by those to whom the four corners of the still unchartered world were sustained by enchantment; by men who lived in a world of their own imaginings, happily ignorant of science. These mountains of theirs are indestructible. They stand on the horizon of the past for all to see but for few to explore. Their solitudes are forever guarded by the impenetrable forests of antiquity.

The foothills, however, are easy of access. These are the hills of the lesser gods with Mount Olympus in their midst. On a lonely cliff Prometheus hangs chained, a symbol of the sacrifice that man demands of the gods he creates. Here is the valley of Eldorado guarded by the mount of Alchemy. Down the slopes of Olympus the Pierian stream flows by its enchanted banks, echoing the laughter of the Muses. In these sheltered valleys the princely unicorn grazes at peace and in the flames of desire the Phoenix is recreated. In the mountains of Arcadia the centaurs, with the wise Chiron in their midst, dream of past wars and smooth-limbed nymphs. Eagle-headed griffins, cocatrice, wyverns, the fire-breathing chimeras, the men 'whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders' and all the fabulous creatures of man's invention, find sanctuary here. 'Whither did the poets hunt for their sincere delight but in the gardens of Alcinous, of Adonis and the orchards of the Hesperides? Where did they dream that heaven should be but in the pleasant gardens of Elysium? Whither do all men walk for their honest recreation, but thither where the earth hath most beneficially painted her face with flourishing colours?'

THE MANDRAKE FIEND

In this antique country of the age of faith there flourishes a magic herb for whose possession men and women sold their souls to the devil. It has walked the earth as a goddess with the gift of Love and as a frightful fiend, the familiar of witches. It brings gold, health and fecundity to its possessor but only at the price of death.

It is described officially as the *Mandragora Officinalis* or Mandrake, of the genus *Solanum*, a family of which the potato and egg plant are more respectable members and the tomato and tobacco plants close relations and it is a native of the Mediterranean countries.

The Abbé Mariti described the Mandrake as he saw it in the mountains about six miles from Jerusalem, as a plant . . . 'like a lettuce to which its leaves have a great resemblance, except that they have a dark green colour. The flowers are purple and the root is for the most part forked. The fruit when ripe, in the beginning of May, is of the size and colour of a small apple, exceedingly ruddy and of a most agreeable odour. Our guide thought us fools for suspecting it to be unwholesome. He ate it freely himself; and it is generally valued by the inhabitants as exhilarating their spirits and a provocative to venery.' The potato, when introduced to Europe from America in the sixteenth century, was subject to the same suspicion. Several members of this family are poisonous, such as the Deadly Nightshade or Belladonna and the reluctance of the Abbé to sample the orange berry was only natural.

At this first introduction the plant seems innocent enough. If its fruit was the cause of exhilaration and renewed desire so much the better. If that was all, its fame would have been only local and the world one rich legend the less. Its bifurcated root and another fact which the Abbé probably had little opportunity of noting, that when drawn from the ground it makes a small strident noise (like flags, irises and most tubers) were the slender foundations on which its reputation was built. The legend, as it was carried from country to country, gathered richness and colour. In every age man's romantic imagination seeks some symbol on which he can vent his dissatisfaction with reality, or some Land of Cockayne where his disciplined dreams can feel at ease. In each locality, therefore, this legend reflected the characteristics of the society in which it found itself. In Greece (for example) the Mandrake

became a symbol, the golden apple of Aphrodite; in Rome, a medicine; in Germany of the middle ages, the Alraun, a devilish spirit in human form.

In Palestine, the country where it flourishes the most prolifically, the Mandrake was called by the Hebrews, the Dudaim or Love Apple and was very much prized. How precious it was is told in the Genesis story of Rachel and the Mandrakes; how that she bargained for them with her sister Leah, who had little need for such stimulants and how that afterwards she bore, though she had been barren, her first-born Joseph. The editor, it is true, gives the glory Jahveh, but there is little doubt that he was familiar with the mandrake's properties. Fraser, in his 'Folklore in the Old Testament' suggests that he was also familiar with another, older, legend which he probably thought it better to suppress. In this account Reuben, tending his father's ass during the harvest, tethered the animal to a root of mandrake. When he returned he found that in struggling to get loose the ass had uprooted the mandrake, with fatal consequences. Perhaps Reuben was ignorant of the mandrake's anger and the horrible cry it utters when uprooted.

'And shrieks like mandrakes torn out of the earth
That living mortals hearing them run mad . . .'

At any rate this is the first recorded victim of its scream. The legend had begun.

Except for a reference in the Song of Songs to its fragrance, there is no more mention of it in the Bible. The Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, in the first century, related that in the dungeons of the castle of Machaerus at Baras, there grew a root that was flame coloured and shone like lightning on persons who attempted to approach. When the intruder drew near, the root retreated and could only be brought to a standstill by the exercise of some rather unpleasant rites. However he tells us that if the hunter was skilful enough he could lasso the root and attach the end of the cord to a dog. In an effort to escape the animal easily uprooted the plant but died, in horrible agony as a consequence. Its value consisted 'solely in its power of expelling the demons or bad spirits of men, which insinuate themselves into the bodies of the living and kill such as do not receive timely assistance'. This curious root Josephus called Baras, after the place where it was found. The plant's ter-

rible cry and its custom of shining like lightning on persons who approached were characteristics of the mandrake. According to the thirteenth-century Arab herbalist, Ebn Beitar, mandrakes were the favourite meeting places of glow worms who found their broad leaves pleasant. They settled on these plants in such numbers that Arabs called them 'the Devils Candle'. Eleven hundred years after Josephus, the mandrake was said to shine by its own light in a terrifying fashion in a country where glow worms are unknown and the mandragora does not grow!

The use of a dog in uprooting the herb became part of a traditional ritual. Since a sacrifice was demanded it was obviously more expedient that the anger of the mandrake should be propitiated by the death of a comparatively valueless domestic animal, than that the digger should risk his own life.

From early times the mandrake was well known in Greece as a medicinal plant. The juices of the root were extracted by boiling and used as an anaesthetic and narcotic. In the third century, B.C., Theophrastus described the special precautions that were taken in culling the herb. To secure the first specimen it was necessary to trace a circle thrice round the mandrake with a sword, then to cut it facing westward. To a second, it was advisable to dance round it talking of love matters all the time, this presumably to ensure its potency as a love charm. It was not until later that a dog was used in the culling ceremony. In the second century A.D., a Roman writer, Aelian, described a root which he calls 'Aglaphotis' because it shone like a star by night, and the method of uprooting it, for which a dog had to be used. By the fifth century the Roman method had invaded Greece. In the herbal of Dioskurides, written for Julia, the daughter of the Emperor at Constantinople, a curious drawing depicts the goddess of discovery, Epinoia, presenting a root in very human form which she has just pulled up while the unfortunate dog which has been used for the purpose is shown in the agonies of death at her feet.

Recently, Doctor Rendel Harris, in the *Ascent of Olympus* ascribes the Aphrodite cult of the Greeks to early beliefs in the potency of the mandrake as a love charm. In his opinion, Aphrodite or Mandragoritis, 'she of the Mandrake', was the imported mandragora of early times and underwent divinisation in the same way as Apollo and Artemis. The Aphrodite legend originates so it

is supposed, from Cyprus or Cythera, where the mandrake legend was firmly established. The early traders of the Aegians, familiar enough with the mandragora as a medicinal herb, might possibly have learned of its more esoteric powers from the older cultures of the south. As Cyprus was in those days a Phoenician trading post perhaps the name of the goddess was a transfer of the Phoenician name for Love Apple. Thus the discovery of its powers would be expressed in the form of a love cult. It is a characteristic of primitive peoples that physical knowledge is first communicated under the veil of symbols.

However the theorist, who has the hardihood to try and unravel the tangled legends of the Greek pantheon, has an almost hopeless task. The Aphrodite myth is one of the most confused. In the *Iliad* we find that Aphrodite was born from Zeus and Diony; in the *Theogony of Hesiod*, that she was generated from the foam of the sea after the mutilation of Uranos. In the *Odyssey* we are told that she was the wife of Hepihaestos; in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* that she was married to Anchises. In the *Theogony* she was described as the mother of three children by Ares. The reason for these contradictory legends is that every poet who sang of a new adventure of a local deity took very good care that it should be agreeable to the general conception of the god or goddess of that region and usually indulged his fancy without restraint. Though it is tempting to consider Aphrodite a brilliant child of the mandrake legend, it is perhaps safer to assert that herbs derived their divine names from the fact that their healing powers were first made known to mortals by the gods who were said to have discovered their medicinal properties.

The mandrake root was used by the Romans almost wholly as a medicinal plant. Pliny the elder, in his *Naturalis Historia* repeats the instructions given by Theophrastus for uprooting the herb but adds in contradiction to other evidence that it would be advisable to keep to windward as he found the smell very unpleasant.

Probably the fame of the mandrake spread through central and northern Europe on the heels of the returning Crusaders in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Early churchmen, who could not be expected to ignore the possibilities in the story of Rachel and the allusion to the root in the Canticles, preached that mandrakes underground have a human form being divine symbols of the

saints in Hades waiting for the second advent of Christ, giving forth the odour of resurrection, that scent that Pliny found so displeasing.

A herbalist of the twelfth century noted that in Southern France there was found a herb 'that shines by night like a lamp, has a head, hands and feet; must be bewritten with iron lest she escape; is not to be touched with iron but dug up with an ivory wand'. It is a curious mixture of a story obviously imported from Palestine and early Roman and Frankish herb-lore. For the legend of the mandrake found on its arrival in northern Europe, a people with established beliefs in the magic of herbs. Before the growth of medicine, herb-lore was of great importance to the community. The healing powers of plants were believed to be largely dependant on the method of culling them. Any divergence from old-established ritual was punished either by the illness or death of the herbalist or a loss in the efficaciousness of the herb. They were uprooted mostly before sunrise, sometimes at midnight on the eve of special feast days. In digging up the plants, the old Roman custom of pouring mead and honey round them, as if to propitiate the earth, was sometimes adhered to. The root was always cut while looking towards the west and afterwards held at arms length to prevent it touching the ground. It was important that cold iron should never be allowed to come in contact with the root, hence gold, red-hot iron or ivory were used in cutting. In lifting up the root the digger used his left hand and in certain cases he was unbelted and unshod and stated to the hanging plant for whom or for what purpose it was uprooted.

In countries where the mandrake was not a native it quickly became identified with herbs which it closely resembled. In England and Wales, the black byrony, cuckoo pint, enchanters nightshade and even the wild cucumber were known and still are, in local dialects as Mandrakes. In German folklore it became identified with the Alrune, a devilish spirit and a magic root in human form who when questioned reveals all secret things touching welfare and increases, makes rich, removes all enemies, brings blessing on wedlock and doubles every piece of coin laid under her.

The ritual to be observed in digging the root became very complex. It was no longer sufficient to dance round it talking of love

matters, for it had ceased to be merely a love apple, sought only by those who wished to ensure a fruitful marriage. It had by this time become a source of revenue to the owner, a magic talisman, that ensured success in marketing, trading, games of chance. He who desired to possess a mandrake first stopped his ears with wax so that he would not hear its fatal cries. Having taken this necessary precaution he went at sunrise to the place where the root was found, with a black dog without a white blemish on it. He then made the sign of the cross three times over it, loosened the soil, tied the cord round the root and the dog's foot and offered the animal a piece of meat, having first had the forethought to starve it for a day or so beforehand. The dog leapt at the morsel and dragged out the root. After suitable prayers had been said over the animal that had been sacrificed, the mandrake was lifted up, taken home, washed in wine, wrapped in silk and laid in a casket. After that, it was bathed every Friday and clothed in a new white smock every moon.

It was very generally believed that the root could be found only under gallows, or at cross-roads where suicides had been buried, the sex of the root being determined by the sex of the malefactor hanging on the gallows. To the medieval way of thinking it was most natural to make herbs grow out of graves. Beneficent and friendly herbs sprung from those of holy men. Those plants which were, on the contrary, associated with witches and magic, grew under gallows or over suicides. For the theory of palingenesis or the belief that living beings or mannikins, as the mandrake had now become, generated from putrescent matter was firmly believed until the publication of Harvey's 'De Generatione' in the seventeenth century. Even Sir Thomas Browne, who made it his business to expose the fallacies of the mandrake superstitions, affirms that it was impossible that mandrakes grew under gallows because 'the currupt and excrementitious humours of man are animated into lice' and not into little men. This belief in spontaneous generation led many learned doctors of physic to experiment in creating life. Isaac D'Israeli in the *Curiosities of Literature* has a diverting tale to tell of a recipe of Paracelsus for creating fairies.

This association of the gallows and the mandrake is a medieval superaddition to the original legend and no precedent can be found in Roman Greek or Arabian lore. Although Josephus's 'Baras' was found in the cellar of the castle where St John the

Baptist had been executed long before, it can not be assumed that the root had generated from the grave of the saint. In connection with this association of the mandrake and the gallows, it is interesting to read in an account of Doctor John Careri's travels in Persia in 1694 that 'while passing through the place where the gallows stand I took notice of a superstition or folly of the barren Persian women; who go three or four times under the gallows, whilst the bodies of malefactors were actually hanging; which I should scarcely believed had I not seen it. They imagine that the dead body can infuse fruitfulness into the womb and make them bear children.'

The mandrake legend in Germany and France acquired an almost incredible intensity and popularity. In 1575 a prosperous Leipsig burgher wrote to his brother in Riga who had complained of the sudden death of his cattle and the souring of his wine in his cellar, and enclosed a mandrake, which he had procured from the town hangman for 65 thalers, a respectable sum in those days. He abjured his unfortunate brother to receive this mandrake into his house, to bath it in warm water and with this water to sprinkle his cattle and the thresholds of his home. To do this every four years, to keep it wrapped in a silken coat and to lay it with his best clothes. 'And you will find,' the letter concludes, 'that your affairs will all come right again if you will make use of the mandrake.' He also adds the information that the water in which the mandrake has been bathed is specially good for a woman in childbirth. 'Let her take a spoonful of it and she will then be delivered with joy and thankfulness.'

Grimm, in the *Deutsche Sagen*, is the authority for stating that the root was considered such a valuable family possession in Germany, that it is passed on the death of the father to the youngest son, on condition that he buried a morsel of bread with his father's body in the coffin.

A rather curious tale is told of a horse dealer of Augsburg. His fate and that of his unfortunate wife who would have nothing to do with devilish aids to prosperity, illustrates the horrible malevolence of the mandrake when spurned. This horsedealer lost his horse and being very poor wandered in despair to an inn to make inquiries. While there he was accosted by some strangers who gave him an Alrune. Being a very devout man he was at first reluctant

to rely on satanic help in his misfortune and could only be persuaded after a long argument to take it into his house. When he returned home he hid the root and did not tell his wife. The sudden appearance of a bag of golden ducats on his table aroused his wife's suspicions and he confessed to her that he had an Alrune in his possession. She induced him to return to the inn and give it back to the strangers but they could not be found. That night the wife opened her husband's chest and finding another purse, opened it, whereupon a black fly buzzed out. Immediately the house caught fire and burned to the ground and the horsedealer, apparently insane with grief over this fresh misfortune, killed both his wife and himself.

In France, the mandrake was known as the 'Main de gloire' a corruption of the word *Mandragora*. In 1603 a certain woman, the wife of a Moor, was hanged as a witch at Romorantin, near Orleans, the charge being that she kept and fed a living mandrake fiend, which was stated to be in the form of a female ape. A contemporary of hers had a main de gloire which he had received from a gypsy. This he had buried at a lucky conjunction of the moon with Venus, in spring and on a Monday. He had then sprinkled it with milk in which three field mice had been drowned. It had become more human than ever. Then he kept it in an oven and wrapped it in a dead man's shroud. He said that as long as he had it he never failed in business or in games of chance. One of the articles of accusation against Joan of Arc was that 'the said Joanna was once wont to carry a main de gloire in her bosom, hoping by means of it to enjoy material prosperity, alleging that the said main de gloire had such power and effect'. In her defence she utterly denied this accusation but admitted that she had heard of one in the ground under a hazel tree, but the exact spot she did not know. The belief that mandrakes were sometimes found buried at the foot of trees is confirmed by an eighteenth-century French writer who was told by a peasant that the main de gloire was to be found at the foot of oaks that bore mistletoe, as deep in the earth as the mistletoe was high on the tree. He was told that the man who found it was obliged to give it meat or bread every day and that this service must never cease otherwise it would kill those who failed to do so. To make up for this the main de gloire would give back twofold next day what had been given it the day before. This superstition is very similar

and is probably a survival of an older German legend that if mistletoe is found on a hazel tree, there lies under it a snake with a gem in its head, coiled around a buried treasure.

In Iceland and the Scandinavian countries it was believed that if the owner of a mandrake root were to steal a coin from a widow during a performance of Mass on either Christmas, Easter or Whitsun and place it under the root, this coin would draw to itself from the pockets of the congregation all those of a similar denomination.

In England the legend never became as widespread as it did in Germany. Shakespeare has many allusions to it as an aphrodisiac, such as 'Thou whoreson mandrake, thou art fitter to be worn in my cap, than to wait at my heels'. and 'The whores call him mandrake', and to cries it was supposed to utter when drawn from the ground,

'Wherefore should I curse thee?
Would curses kill as doth the mandrake's groan
I would invent as bitter searching terms
As curs'd, as harsh, as horrible to bear.'

He also alludes to a superstition that the mandrake makes insane those who eat it. In *Macbeth*, Banquo, after meeting the weird sisters, asks,

'Were such things here as we do speak about
Or have we eaten on the insane root
That takes reason prisoner. . . .'

But little was added to the legend. In fact we find it mentioned in early garden lists as growing innocently in many English gardens side by side with humbler flowers. In 1570 Benjamin Heyden grew it in his garden in Hampshire. The famous gardener Tradescant owned both male and female mandragoras in his garden at Lambeth. And some years previously, the herbalist Parkinson, mentions it as growing 'in my Lord Wootton's garden at Canterbury'.

In Langhorne's 'Beeflower' it appears in less innocent guise,

'Mark how that rooted mandrake wears
His human feet, his human hands!
Oft, as his ghastly form he rears,
Aghast the frightened plowman stands.'

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It is also possible that the mad Tom of Bedlam referred to the legend when he sang,

'The moon's my constant mistress
And the lonely owl my marrow
The flaming drake
And the night-crow make
Me music to my sorrow.'

Parkinson and Gerarde, the herbalists, Francis Bacon, Sir Thomas Browne and John Donne, all mention the mandrake, but with little sympathy for the superstition.

By the seventeenth century the root had become so sought after that itinerant hawkers began to make mandrake figures. These they sold very profitably to childless women, some of whom gave large prices for a single root. Italian women payed as much as twenty-five to thirty ducats in gold for one of these images. How they were made is described by Sir Thomas Browne, 'Many are who carry about roots and sell them to ignorant people which handsomely make out the shape of a woman or man. These are contrivances of art . . . for the roots are made of canes, briony and other plants. In these while fresh and virent they carve the figures of men and women, first sticking therein grains of barley or millet where they intend the hair should grow, then bury them in the sand until the grains shoot forth their roots. They afterwards clip and trim those those tender strings in the fashion of beards and other hairy integuments . . . all of which like other impostures once discovered is easily affected and may be practised in the root of white briony every spring.'

Two such effigies, covered with false hair, have been preserved in the Imperial Library of Vienna since 1680, and formerly belonged to the Emperor Rudolph II, a patron of the occult sciences.

The carvers became so skilful that these images were preferred to the natural roots. They are still sold in the Near East by craftsmen who make a business of cutting and carving mandrake roots into human shapes. The virtues ascribed to these dolls are not always similar; some act as love charms, others make the wearer invulnerable. But they all have two properties in common. They reveal treasure hidden underground and relieve their owner of

chronic illnesses. The Turkish name for the root is Adam Koku, 'the man root'; the Arabic name, Abdul Selam, 'the servant of health'.

The small images carried by a childless woman in the hope that by their influence, she will be able to conceive, were usually mandrake roots. For in this form of homeopathic magic, the effigies were considered most effective. The belief still exists. In modern Chicago and New York, mandrake roots are imported by orthodox Jews. They are still thought to be male and female and are used remedially, the scrapings being swallowed in water. They are valued as talismans and insure fertility. In modern Cairo, drug sellers give pills made from the roots to young couples who are going to be married and wish to have a large family of boys. In Baghdad amulets of the root are worn by men. They stimulate virility and make their wearers prosperous. In Attica young men and girls still carry pieces of mandrake about with them as love charms.

The romantic imagination of Europeans of the middle ages, their piety and susceptible faith, had a counterpart in their capacity for intolerance and diabolical cruelty. This was a period in which the Christian religion reached its perfect flowering and the age which invented the Inquisition. The mandrake legend was at its height during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a period in which the belief in the devil acquired an intensity and an immensity of scope unknown before or since. The study of cabalistic literature enormously increased the representation of all sorts of demoniacal and magic arts. The study of the classics revived in many minds the lost faiths of the gods of antiquity. Greek and Roman mythology filled every learned head with new phantoms from the myths of the past. Witchcraft was undoubtedly the last stronghold of the worship of the older pagan gods. It received fresh impetus from the classic revival and flourished in a soil well tilled by Luther.

In this turmoil the mandrake legend flourished. It arrived in Central Europe, as a Love plant, a fruit that brought blessing on wedlock, one that had given perhaps, the world the legend of Aphrodite and the golden apple. It protested violently enough when uprooted, even in its native Palestine, but in extenuation a plea of self-defence is justifiable. Compared to the malevolence

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acquired by the root in Germany, it is nothing, for there it corrupted men with devil's gold, lived on the rotting flesh of criminals, demanded milk, food, silks and constant baths, was the familiar of witches and killed those that spurned its evil associations or drove them to madness.

For its sins it has been banished to the far country where all myths live out the days of their immortality. Its ghost still walks the earth with the gift of fecundity but it is only a pale shadow of the Mandrake fiend, that flashes like lightning and shrieks in the hills and valleys where the Unicorn still grazes and the Phoenix nests in the ashes of its dead self.